In *Gangs and Organized Crime*, George W. Knox, Gregg W. Etter, and Carter F. Smith offer an informed and carefully investigated examination of gangs and organized crime groups, covering street gangs, prison gangs, outlaw motorcycle gangs, and organized crime groups from every continent. The authors have spent decades investigating gangs as well as researching their history and activities, and this dual professional-academic perspective informs their analysis of gangs and crime groups. They take a multidisciplinary approach that combines criminal justice, public policy and administration, law, organizational behavior, sociology, psychology, and urban planning perspectives to provide insight into the actions and interactions of a variety of groups and their members. This textbook is ideal for criminal justice and sociology courses on gangs as well as related course topics like gang behavior, gang crime and the inner city, organized crime families, and transnational criminal groups. *Gangs and Organized Crime* is also an excellent addition to the professional's reference library or primer for the general reader. More information is available at the supporting website – www.gangsandorganizedcrime.com.

**George W. Knox** authored the first full textbook on gangs in 1991 (*An Introduction to Gangs*) and the book *National Gang Resource Handbook* (1995). He has co-authored several other gang books: *Hate Crime and Extremist Gangs* (with Gregg Etter, 2008); *Gang Profiles: An Anthology* (with Curtis Robinson, 2004); *The Vice Lords: A Gang Profile Analysis* (with Andrew V. Papachristos, 2002); and *Schools Under Siege* (1992). He has contributed about 10 book chapters and has over 50 journal publications, mostly on gang issues. He is the founder and executive director of the National Gang Crime Research Center and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Gang Research*. He has done gang research for over 30 years, and has taught gang courses for 22 years.

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GANGS AND ORGANIZED CRIME

GEORGE W. KNOX, GREGG W. ETTER, AND CARTER F. SMITH
This book is dedicated to the professionals who strive to protect our communities from the gangs and organized crime groups in the book, the scholars who study them, and the students who hope to be like either.
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Gangs have been part of the American experience since the founding of this nation. They have been called street gangs, street corner gangs, inner-city gangs, urban gangs, suburban gangs, rural gangs, male gangs, female gangs, juvenile gangs, youth gangs, delinquent gangs, criminal gangs, outlaw gangs, biker gangs, drug gangs, and prison gangs. In a 1927 study, gang researcher Frederic M. Thrasher (2000) reported that gangs found among Chicago’s neighborhoods primarily comprised the following immigrant populations: Bohemians, Croatians, Germans, Greeks, Gypsies, Italians, Irish, Jews, Lithuanians, Mexicans, Poles, and Russians. In the decades since Thrasher’s study, we have discovered gangs in all 50 states, in many other countries, and on most continents, with only Antarctica as the exception. Gangs tend to appear in response to a social need.
Needs in that category can be seen as protection against aggressors, providing social services, and generating revenue. Once the presence of the gang addresses the need, the gang may grow beyond the need. That would mean they could begin to become the aggressor, offer protection to others, or compete for revenue opportunities with legitimate organizations. Gangs seem to be drawn from every possible combination of demographic variables.

Organized crime, too, is a part of the culture of many societies. Organized crime groups often form from gangs, sometimes form independently, and are often less visible to police and the community than gangs, as they are often more advanced in their criminal organization and behavior. Organized crime groups, like gangs, tend to appear when the police and the politicians lack control. Organized crime groups are typically focused on profit.

This textbook was written to share information on gangs and organized crime groups in America. Readers of all types and experience levels should find value in the book, as the authors strive to share what they have learned about gangs in their respective professional and academic endeavors. You will see three common threads throughout the book. First, gangs and organized crime groups are made up of many individuals, hence their analysis and treatment should be focused more on the group than the individual. The second theme of the book is that the members of gangs and organized crime groups are typically adults, or led by adults. Finally, while at any given point in history there may be one predominant culture seen as being mostly engaged in gangs or organized crime, members of these organizations have come from many continents, countries, and cultures.

What you will not see is a focus on hate groups, domestic terrorists, or extremist groups. Hate groups advocate and practice hatred, hostility, or violence towards specific members of society. Domestic terrorist or extremist group members commit crimes that endanger human life intending to intimidate or coerce people, influence government policy, or change government conduct within the United States. Those groups are significantly different than the groups we identify here.

There is a lot of detail in some of the sections. We realize that there are many applications for this information, and did not want to limit the contents for one use while limiting the usefulness for another. For students, professors, and professional researchers, each chapter can serve as a stand-alone study topic. We recommend choosing the areas that are most relevant to the reader, either for the whole class or for a significant portion of it. For example, if you want to spend less time on a certain type of organized crime and more on investigation and prosecution of gang violence, simply using the selected chapters for study would serve that purpose. This recommendation would apply to a typical 15-week semester with midterm and final examinations.

For anyone working in one of the criminal justice fields, whether police, courts, corrections, or security, or another practitioner for whom gangs and organized crime groups are an interest, you should find the book useful as reference material, though hopefully
The Early Gangs

Gangs were not always seen as criminal organizations. Gang violence was a part (often a condition) of life where the gang members lived (Sante, 1991). Gangs have been in existence in some form in Western society for about four centuries. Pearson found there were organized gangs like the Muns, Dead Boys, Blues, and Nickers in London in the 1600s. They terrorized their communities by breaking windows, assaulting the Watch (the police), and “rolling old ladies in barrels” (Pearson, 1983, p. 188). Like more contemporary gangs, they wore colored ribbons to differentiate themselves and often fought each other for control of turf.

Gangs first emerged in the eastern cities of North America, which had conditions conducive to gang formation and growth, mostly created by the many waves of immigration and urban overcrowding (Sante, 1991). Haskins (1974) and Bonn (1984) reported that the makings of criminal gangs existing in America as early as 1760. Haskins noted that between 1660 and 1776, New York had evolved from a population of 1,000 with both an orphanage and a poorhouse and still had a group of “young, homeless boys” who were a nightly “source of trouble to respectable citizens” (Haskins, 1974, p. 16). Before the Revolutionary War, around 1764, Ebenezer Mackintosh led a gang-like group of men in Boston called the South Enders. Mackintosh was a shoemaker in his late twenties, and his gang looted the homes of several government officials in their protest of the Stamp Act of 1776, leading Mackintosh to become a powerful figure in the community (Haskins, 1974).

As with contemporary society, the problems with deviant youth were identified back then as either a lack of role models or insufficient supervision by authority. The earliest identifiable gangs in the U.S. came to existence shortly after the Revolutionary War (1775–1783; Sante, 1991). Haskins (1974) explained that following the Revolutionary War there was a time of lawlessness. When the British rulers were driven out, the police forces and other institutions were driven out as well. Combining that environment with the presence of idled young men who had left their country villages to seek a better life in the city, it may be easier to see why the resulting violence and mob activity occurred (Haskins, 1974). In New York, many of the gangs formed in the Five Points area, then on the outskirts of town. It was a wilderness surrounding a large lake referred to as the Collect.

Gangs of that period included the Bowery Boys, The Broadway Boys, and the Smith’s Vly gang, all of whom were white, and the Fly Boys and Long Bridge Boys, which were...
Figure 1.1

Map of the Collect Pond and Five Points, New York City. Public domain.

Geographicus Rare Antique Maps, a specialist dealer in rare maps and other cartography, via Wikimedia Commons as part of a cooperation project.
all-black gangs (Sante, 1991). Those gang members were nearly all employed in respectable trades like mechanics, carpenters, and butchers. Most of their gang activity consisted of arguing (and fighting) over the portion of territory each could claim as their own, much as contemporary neighborhood-based gangs do (Sante, 1991).

In the years that followed, America began receiving “scores of poverty-stricken immigrants” (Haskins, 1974, p. 22). A historical review of American gangs would suggest they emerged along both racial and ethnic lines. The early street gangs of New York and Chicago were almost exclusively made up of immigrants. Bonn described gangs as clearly having ethnic homogeneity in terms of their organization. “Irish gangs were the first to emerge,” followed by German, Jewish and Italian gangs (Bonn, 1984, pp. 333–334). According to Howell (2012), in both New York and Chicago, the earliest gangs formed in concert with the arrival of predominantly white European immigrants, particularly German, French, British, and Scandinavians, from 1783 to 1860.

The first criminal gang with a definite, acknowledged leadership, the Forty Thieves, formed around 1826 in the Five Points area of New York (Haskins, 1974). The name Five Points denoted the geographic location where five streets intersected, and a park named Paradise Square was situated at the hub. The second recorded gang, the Kerryonians, was named after the county in Ireland from which they came. Similar gangs with equally interesting names also formed in the Five Points area, including the Chichesters, Roach Guards, Plug Uglies (named after their large plug hats), Shirt Tails (distinguished by wearing their shirts outside their trousers), and Dead Rabbits (Haskins, 1974).

Figure 1.2

Early gangs. A fight between the Dead Rabbits and the Bowery Boys in New York City. From the newspaper article “Four Scenes From the Riot in the Sixth Ward” (1857). Public domain. Illustrated in Frank Leslie’s illustrated newspaper, v. 4 (July 18, 1857), p. 108
The second generation youth of immigrant groups were most susceptible to gang involvement. Asbury recorded crimes in Chicago in the late 1850s ranging from burglaries to holdups being committed by bands of men who were recently unemployed (1986). He identified one specific gang that was based out of the Limerick House and committed dozens of robberies. A thief known as John the Baptist led another gang of pickpockets (Asbury, 1986). He was apparently so named because of his attire and behavior, as he often left religious tracts behind.

New York–area gangs of the late 1850s included the Daybreak Boys, Buckaroos, Slaughter Housers, and the Border Gang (Sante, 1991). Many of the New York gangs hung out along the waterfront, so their crimes focused on people who lived and worked in that area. Muggings, murders, and robberies were their crimes of choice, and the area was considered so dangerous that the police avoided it unless there were at least six of them (Sante, 1991). In the late 1860s, German gangs began forming in New York. One gang, the Hell’s Kitchen Gang, terrorized the district for which they were named, committing robberies, assaults, and burglaries (Haskins, 1974).

Gangs in post–Civil War New York were snappy dressers, joining together for identity, wearing distinctive clothing (specifically headwear), and seeking publicity (Haskins, 1974). Haskins identified New York gangs of that era with names like the Stable Gang, the Molasses Gang, and the Silver Gang. Many came from poverty, and sought a group with which they could ally. Those gangs differed from previous gangs, as many of them were drug users (Haskins, 1974). When soldiers returned from the war addicted to the morphine they were given to ease the pain of their war wounds, they sought out more of the drug than they could legally obtain (Haskins, 1974). Gangs willingly provided a source for illicit drugs, and some gang members also became users. The most popular drug at the time was cocaine, which added a whole new dimension to gang activities.

The Whyos were the “most powerful downtown (New York) gang between the Civil War and the 1890s” (Sante, 1991, p. 214). The gang was made up of pickpockets, sneak thieves (stealing without detection or violence), and brothel owners. The gang members were very resourceful, offering their services to those in need in the form of a menu, listing the provision of two black eyes for $4, a leg or arm broken for $19, and a stabbing for $25 (Sante, 1991). The “big job” (presumably a murder) cost at least $100.

Perkins (1987) found that white street gangs had been documented in Chicago since the 1860s. Thrasher (1927) reported that most of the Chicago gang activity in the 1860s consisted of breaking fences and stealing cabbages from people’s gardens, as there was “not much else to take” (p. 4). Other groups, including Irish, Italians, Jews, and Poles, arrived from 1880 to 1920. Gangs of some type existed in Chicago as early as the 1880s, with groups like the Hickory Street gang spending their time reading, “play[ing] cards, study[ing], and drink[ing] their beer” (Thrasher, 2000, p. 4). Irish gangs like the Dukies and the Shielders influenced activity around the Chicago-area stockyards during that time, robbing men leaving work and terrorizing other immigrants (Howell, 2012).
The gangs fought constantly among themselves, but sometimes joined together to war with the black gangs. Many blacks (African Americans) had arrived from the southern states after the U.S. Civil War, most leaving to escape the oppressive Jim Crow laws and the life of the sharecropper. Cureton (2009) traced the origin of Chicago’s black street gangs to the segregated inner-city areas, beginning in the early 1900s. Cureton (2009) argued that the street gang (not the family or the church) was the most important social network organization for urban youth, even though it was the surest way to end up a felon, convict, or dead.

Elsewhere in the nation, criminal gangs that engaged in robbery were plentiful following the Civil War. Jesse and Frank James, for example, were motivated by their hatred of the Union to commit bank and stagecoach robberies. The brothers had fought on the Confederate side of the Civil War and, like many Southerners at the time, opposed the Union Army even after the war.

Early Juvenile Gangs

Historical accounts identify the institution of apprenticeships as a culprit, if not a contributor, to the prevalence of young, unsupervised men in the cities. The practice of apprenticeships matched a young male of 14 and above with an employer, who was presumed to be responsible for teaching the young boy a trade or employable skill. In those times, even young children were expected to contribute to the household income in many families (Pearson, 1983). Sadly, the system that supported the young teenage boys seeking apprenticeships appeared to be ineffective.

The apprentice system had been considered a problem since the early 1700s, as both the supervision of masters and the behavior of apprentices were being questioned. In the 1790s, as the increased supply of slave labor created an unnecessary surplus of apprentices, many an idled youngster was shuffled off to the orphanages. They often escaped and formed up with like-minded young men in “armies of homeless boys wandering about, stealing food, and sleeping in alleyways” (Haskins, 1974, p. 21). The apprentice system was an easy target for complaints regarding the increase in what was becoming known as “juvenile delinquency” (Pearson, 1983, p. 191). Pearson noted that some blamed it for causing the problem in the first place. Many of the young boys who were recruited as apprentices were described as idle and often violent, and were so numerous that they were a subculture of their own.

While previously there was a thriving business of child labor, either through apprenticeships or the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, the dynamics of the labor force changed when a concerted effort to stop child labor was started (Haskins, 1974). By the mid-1870s, over 100,000 children were working in New York factories, and when the reformation began, many of them were idled overnight. While many government efforts
were implemented, at least 10,000 of those children became easy recruits for the street
gangs of the time (Haskins, 1974). Those children aligned in support gangs such as the
Forty Little Thieves, the Little Plug Uglies, and the Little Dead Rabbits, according to
Asbury (1927).

Twentieth-Century Gangs and Organized Crime Groups

The gangs that ruled New York from the 1890s onward included gang conglomer-
ates known as the Five Pointers, the Eastmans, the Gophers, and the Hudson Dusters
(Sante, 1991). Gangs then appeared to be more like organized crime groups, as they
mirrored the practices of the business community, and merged with like-minded organ-
izations to increase their geographic exposure and control. The gangs were increasingly
more sophisticated than their predecessors, and in some cases required written reports
for contracted work (Sante, 1991). As has been seen in eras since, those adult gangs had
a succession plan in place, with a strategy for replacing and supplementing their mem-
bership with new recruits from their farm teams. Many of the gangs had female auxiliary
support groups as well (Sante, 1991).

As the numbers of Chinese immigrations were added to the population of New York
in the latter part of the nineteenth century, their secret societies, known as tongs, started
forming. The tongs first formed for mutual aid, but then became powerful and often
violent (Haskins, 1974). Some of them ran grocery stores with areas for illicit gambling,
while others provided areas for opium consumption. As their activities became more
profitable, other gangs started looking for business in the area of New York known as
Chinatown, especially the gang known as the Five Pointers, of which Al Capone was a
member before he moved to Chicago (Anbinder, 2001).

One of Asbury’s (1986) noteworthy findings was a group of Negro women in 1890s
Chicago that committed hundreds of holdups before they were arrested and convicted.
They were known as footpads, a term used at the time to describe a robber or thief who
focused on victims who were walking around town. The women were armed with guns,
knives, and baseball bats and often worked in pairs. They cut many a victim across the
knuckles if they failed to respond fast enough when confronted (Asbury, 1986). Some
were so sophisticated that they had fortified hiding places for when the police came
looking for them.

From the 1890s to 1910, Chicago grew in both size and status. It passed the 200
square mile mark in size and recorded over 2 million citizens living within its borders,
making it second only to New York in both population and importance in commerce
(Asbury, 1986). Chicago’s problems included an overwhelming amount of political cor-
rupption and an inefficient police department. As immigration was neither checked nor
regulated at the time, Chicago quickly became the home to a diverse group of Swedes,
Norwegians, Poles, and Germans, as the “good and bad of Europe” brought their “customs and hatreds, their feuds and vendettas” (Asbury, 1986, p. 204).

Gangs in Chicago around 1900 engaged in human trafficking, too. As with other large American cities, brothels supplied young women for their customers, and that required a system that constantly sought out a “fresh” supply (Asbury, 1986). The average age of prostitutes in those times was 23.5 years, and many of the women were identified and supplied by gangs of white-slavers. Although a nationwide outfit was never identified, the methods the gangs used and the precise and effective coordination between the groups indicated there was more than simply a professional relationship. One such gang in Chicago was affiliated with similar gangs in New York, St. Louis, and Milwaukee. While some of their “products” were apparently willing participants in prostitution, many stories surfaced of young teenagers who were promised legal employment in the big city, only to be forced into prostitution (Asbury, 1986). Even back then, many of these gangs had international connections.

Also, around 1900, the American version of the Mafia started to establish itself in New York (Sante, 1991). Sante (1991) identified the genealogy of one contemporary organized crime group, starting with the Chichesters of Five Points, to the Whyos, to the Gambino family. Regardless of whether that line of succession is accurate, the underlying political and economic framework in each of the eras represented a fertile ground in which criminal groups thrived. Once the Mafia took over, the organization of criminal activity by typical street gangs was limited.

Many of the gangs were encouraged to profit from the institution of Prohibition, a constitutional ban on the production, importation, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States from 1920 to 1933. Organized crime group leaders like Al Capone and Johnny Torrio had been running prostitution rings and other vice crimes for some time and saw the opportunity to profit from the demand for alcohol (Asbury, 1986). Torrio persuaded the leaders of many a criminal gang to shift their profit center from burglaries and bank robberies to bootlegging (Asbury, 1986). Breweries were purchased and territories were assigned. This distribution network worked well for a time, and only folded when renegade gangs who were not part of the initial agreement got involved in the industry.

Black gangs in Chicago did not appear until the 1920s, and Perkins (1987) asserted that most Blacks who lived in Chicago before 1930 were the offspring of Blacks who moved there from the Southern U.S. The residences of those blacks were typically confined to underdeveloped, segregated areas. That compounded the overcrowding problem in the substandard housing that was available. Many of the males were chronically unemployed, resulting in many spending countless idle hours in the street (Perkins, 1987).

Between 1910 and 1930, Chicago gained almost 200,000 black residents during the Great Migration of more than a million blacks from the southern states. That gave the city an enormous urban black population, along with New York City, Cleveland,
Detroit, Philadelphia, and other Northeast and Midwest cities (Alonso, 1999). Black gangs in Chicago likely formed to protect their members (and perhaps their neighborhood) from gangs of white youth.

In 1927, Thrasher identified the 1,313 early gangs (with an estimated 25,000 members) that were active in Chicago's neighborhoods at the time, including groups with names such as the Onions, Kenwoods, hard-boiled Crawfords, and Bloody Broomsticks. In Thrasher's study of Chicago gangs, he observed a specific gang in Chicago during the 1920s called the Dirty Dozens. During the Chicago race riots of 1919, Dirty Dozen members chased and threatened several black men in a 30-block stretch of run-down housing on the South Side known as the Black Belt. Moore (1998) found that the dominance of Chicago's white ethnic gangs ended shortly after Thrasher's research was completed. He found that "the gangs of the 1920s were largely a one-generation immigrant ghetto phenomenon" (p. 68).

By the start of the 1930s, gangs had firmly established in Chicago's African American communities. The school system was "ineffective and alienating" for African Americans, and unemployment in the 1930s was said to be eroding traditional family structures (Moore, 1998). Active racial discrimination limited the number of legitimate employment opportunities, while the number of illegal employment opportunities flourished, tied to the notorious political machine that was active in Chicago.

Cureton (2009) found the proliferation of gangs in most major urban areas and even some smaller poverty-stricken areas was significantly related to black migration and overcrowding in socially disorganized areas, a subculture of conflict deviance, crime, and violence, dysfunctional family dynamics, and blocked access to legitimate opportunities, among other factors. As was seen in the Northeast and Midwest, the migration of blacks to historically white southern Los Angeles began with the move of blacks from the South, mostly from Louisiana and Mississippi. Blacks were simply looking for a better life than they had in the South, and the non-black European immigrant communities in the West offered more employment opportunities in factories and an escape from southern oppression. The move turned out to be the trigger for traditional white supremacist ideology, institutional inequality (in housing, education, and employment), and restrictions relative to where blacks could socialize. That led to a civil rights movement of sorts in that region in the late 1940s (Cross, 1973).

Miller (1975), in a report for the Justice Department, found that by 1975 the membership of most U.S. gangs was no longer predominantly white. Prior to the 1970s, most street gangs in America consisted of the sons (and sometimes daughters) of Jewish, Irish, Italian, Polish, German, and other European Americans. Miller's work was documented in the pilot National Youth Gang Survey, which found high levels of gang violence in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, among other cities, and a shift in the demographics of the typical gang member. Today we can find gangs that are composed of many different ethnic or racial groups (i.e., they can be heterogeneous).
The basic truth, though, is that today most street and prison gangs and other organized crime groups remain relatively homogeneous with respect to race and ethnicity.

**How Many Gangs and Gang Members Are There Today?**

Gangs have been reported in all 50 states. According to the National Gang Center (NGC), funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), after a decline from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, the prevalence of gang activity significantly increased between 2001 and 2005, remaining constant thereafter (Egley, Howell, & Harris, 2014, p. 2). In 2010, the numbers started climbing again, and reached an estimated 850,000 gang members nationwide by 2012 (Figure 1.3). At the same time, the OJJDP reported that the estimated number of youth gangs steadily increased from 27,300 to 30,700. While during this same period (2007–2012) the number of problem jurisdictions declined, the number of gang-related homicides increased by 19.6%.

The Federal Bureau of Investigations’ National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) gathers statistics on several gang variables. NGIC surveys specifically ask respondents to estimate the number of gang members in their jurisdictions. The 2009 and 2011 surveys identified 1 million and 1.4 million gang members, respectively (NGIC, 2009, 2011). The 2013 and 2015 surveys were unable to provide an estimate due to inconclusive reporting and a lack of confidence in estimates, and no attempt was made in 2017.

**Most Gang Members Are Adults**

Though differences have existed based on region and population size of the jurisdiction, police typically have reported that most gang members were adults (Klein &

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>2007</th>
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<td>731,000</td>
<td>756,000</td>
<td>782,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gang-Related Homicides</td>
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<td>1,659</td>
<td>2,083</td>
<td>2,020</td>
<td>1,824</td>
<td>2,363</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.3

**Gang Magnitude Indicators.**

Egley, Howell, and Harris (2014, p. 2), Table 1
Maxson, 2006). In fact, both government and academic gang researchers have found a progressive increase in the proportion of adult gang members for almost every year since 1996. Analysts and researchers who use the phrase “youth gangs” find their results hard to apply to the real world of criminal justice—there are no “youth laws,” there are juvenile laws and adult criminal codes. Anyone 17 or older in Illinois, for example, is an adult under law, and their behavior in violating the law is not regarded as “juvenile delinquency,” it is “adult criminality.” In fact, as was previously addressed, research since then tends to show there are significantly more adult gang members than juveniles. The problem, then, with using the term “youth gang” is that it inaccurately describes the social reality of American gangs. Further, it implies that such gangs have no adult leaders to whom they are accountable.

Sante (1991) showed that adult gangs had a strategy for replacing and supplementing their membership with new recruits from their farm systems. As Asbury (1927) noted, some of the support gangs acknowledged the adult gangs they were supporting, with names such as the Forty Little Thieves, the Little Plug Uglies, and the Little Dead Rabbits. Thrasher (2000) observed that older gang members might have allowed younger boys to hang around, though they may have prohibited them from actual membership in the gang.

Annual surveys of the NGC, formerly the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC), have shown a progressive increase in adult gang members for almost every year since 1996. In 1996, the percentage of gang members was reported to be 50 percent juvenile and 50 percent adult. In 2006, the distribution was 36.5 percent juvenile and 63.5 percent adult. In the 2007 (and previous years) report, the survey results specifically excluded exclusively adult gangs (NYGC, 2009).

Another study found a significant increase in the average age of gang members in a Midwestern city (Etter & Swymeler, 2008). In a comparative study of police-identified active gang members in 1996 and 2006, all four major national street gangs and each of the independent local gangs studied showed increases in the number of older members. The average age of gang members in that study increased from 20.03 to 26.59. Along with the increase, the study revealed that approximately 34.87 percent of the gang members remained active in the gang for 10 years or more (Etter & Swymeler, 2008). Those increased average ages may have indicated not only an aging of the gang population but also an increase in the recruiting of older gang members.

Some communities have had a significant number of adult gang members (Katz & Webb, 2006). In a multisite study covering 1998–1999, Katz and Webb (2006) examined the police response to gangs to identify the factors that led to the creation of a gang unit, alternative responses to community gang problems, and the relevant beliefs held by gang unit officers. Most (79% and up) of the gang members in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Las Vegas, Nevada, and Phoenix, Arizona, were young adults between 18 and 36 years old.
In 2007, the New Jersey State Police (NJSP) Street Gang Bureau collected information about gang activity and analyzed gang trends. In their summary of recent NJSP Gang Surveys, analysts found that most (60%) gang members in 2001 were adults. In 2004, 53% of the reported gang members were adults. Though there was an overall decrease, the number of adult gang members still exceeded the number of juvenile gang members.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) 2007 Statewide Gang Survey indicated 56.5% of the state gang population was adults. The focus of the research was clearly on youth gangs, and the authors of the report noted an average 38.4% of gang members were between 15 and 17 years of age. The results of the study showed that over half of the gang members were adults (FDLE, 2007). While these estimates may be dated, the limited research conducted to determine the percentages of adults involved in gangs requires us to use that data.

While the NGC and the NGIC have tried to identify the number of gang members in the U.S. by asking police officers about the people in their jurisdictions, gang researchers Pyrooz and Sweeten recently (2015) suggested there were significantly more young people involved with gangs. Using a combination of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the U.S. Census to produce a national estimate of gang membership, they estimated that there were 1,059,000 juvenile gang members, representing 2.0% of persons (about 1 of every 50) between the ages of 5 and 17 in the U.S. population. They also found about 400,000 juveniles leave gangs each year, and about the same number join gangs each year. They also noted most who joined a gang left it long before adulthood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Adult %</th>
<th>Juvenile %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona (Phoenix) (2000)</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida (2007)</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada (Las Vegas) (1998)</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey (2004)</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico (Albuquerque) (1999)</td>
<td>88.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States (2006)</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>26.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So, if Pyrooz and Sweeten’s estimates that there were over 1 million juvenile gang members were accurate, there would be no fewer than an additional 1.1 million adult gang members (if the 53:47 ratio found by the New Jersey State Police is accurate) to as much as 5.6 million (if the higher 85:15 ratio found in one of the studies by Katz and Webb is accurate). That would mean there were actually at least 2.1 million gang members in the United States when the last recorded NGIC tally was conducted in 2011. It could also mean that there were close to 2.6 million in 2013, 2.8 million in 2015, and as many as 3.5 million and 4 million gang members in the United States in 2017 and 2019, respectively, if those numbers continued to climb.

**Gangs in the Community**

The essential question here is: can anything be done about the gang crime problem in the community? Some may say that it is possible to greatly impact gangs, perhaps even dismantle them. Others may say through social services we can work directly with gangs and gang members, and perhaps show them a better way of life. The most extreme form of this therapeutic intervention would be that we can “de-program” gang members. Still others may say that no one has ever come up with the one-size-fits-all rehabilitation or prevention solution. Therefore, it may be impossible to turn around the gang crime problem.

So how do people come to perceive gangs as a social problem? If a group of gang members hang out on the street corner by the neighborhood grocery and their presence scares off customers, then that is often seen as a private matter for the small business owner. Over time, other area shop owners may talk to a local police officer and mention a similar impact by gang members on their businesses. Former customers may also mention the gang members on the corner to the police officer. To most of us, the gang members on the street corner are perceived as a private problem—a personal matter. But to the police officer, the gang members’ presence has become a public matter. The many similar personal matters of individuals become a collective public matter when recognized by a whole community; they become an acknowledged social problem (Mills, 1959). Gangs became a serious community problem in the late 1990s. Gang-related crime, particularly drugs and shootings, popped up in the suburbs and rural counties. Some researchers argued that the media whipped up a “moral panic” among the people. As such, state legislators passed new laws targeting gangs and gang members. William Recktenwald (1997) made statements in a newspaper article that reflected the standard presentation of gangs in the media: “The sale and use of crack cocaine . . . has spread across the entire state” (p. 1), and “Illinois is experiencing an alarming increase in gang-related violence . . . with gang homicides jumping fourfold to 215 from 1987 to 1995.
David E. Neely (1997) suggested gang-associated problems were becoming “an inescapable concern for mainstream America” (p. 37).

Suman K. Sirpal identified perceptions of gangs held by the public and law enforcement, and the portrayal of gangs in the media. He suggested that gang members are portrayed as “mean and cruel, have no respect for their own or others’ lives, and commit senseless crimes for personal profit . . . who have no aim in life but the destruction of the society for personal gain” (Sirpal, 1997, p. 13). Researchers Claire Johnson, Barbara Webster, and Edward Connors (1995) suggested that street gangs were a social and political concern due to the crimes that their members committed. Other authors have suggested a relationship between gangs and social problems: “gangs are a community problem” (Virginia Commission on Youth, 1996); “The gang problem is not a ‘their problem’; the gang phenomena is an ‘our problem’” (Kirk-Duggan, 1997, p. 24); and “Communities are implementing a combination of prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies to address the gang problem” (Burch & Chemers, 1997, p. 1). In their review of findings from a nationwide survey sponsored by the National Institute of Justice, Johnson et al. (1995) found more than 80% of prosecutors acknowledged a gang problem in their jurisdiction.

Gangs are no longer just a problem for the inner city. Gangs are also found in the suburbs and even in rural areas of the country. Recktenwald (1997) cited a report prepared by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority that stated, “While urban areas were hit particularly hard, suburban and rural communities were far from immune from the problem” (p. 1). That assessment was supported by John P. Moore’s (1997) assertion that the number of cities, towns, and counties experiencing gang problems was growing. The federal government joined private citizens and researchers in the perception of gangs as a social problem in the 1990s.

More recent analysis showed while 41.6 percent of gangs were in larger cities, an estimated 27.1 percent were in smaller cities (NGC, 2013). Another 25.8 percent of gangs were in suburban counties and 5.5 percent are in rural counties. Comparing the OJJDP (Egley et al., 2014) numbers for total estimated youth gang members in 2012 (850,000) with the U.S. Census Bureau’s (2013) estimated total population in 2012 (about 314 million), it appears that perhaps 1 out of every 370 U.S. residents may be a gang member. The numbers would likely be higher if the NGIC had continued their tally since 2011. The statistics stand as seemingly objective and accurate measures of the gang threat in America. However, many gang researchers believe that the overall number of gangs and gang members has been underestimated. Independent estimates of the scope and extent of gang crime in America generally give higher estimates than OJJDP figures. Since many self-reporting studies have indicated that gang membership peaks around age 14 or 15, some scholars have questioned the validity of police reporting (Klein & Maxson, 2006).
The federal government typically has several agencies at work to address the gang problem. However, it is the position of some researchers that the federal government may have ignored the issue of gangs for too long early on, and has now underestimated, and under-accounted for, the real extent of the gang problem. Thus any presentation of gangs may reflect either public perceptions, government goals, or the actuality of the issue. Since gangs and gang-related crime may reach out and touch anyone at any time, gangs are a topic worthy of every person's study, regardless of his or her academic discipline or career field.

Gangs need not have a publicly known label or name for their group, although most American gangs do. Yablonsky recorded the naming process of one gang in New York in the 1960s:

How did we get our name? Well, when we were in the police station, the cops kept askin' us who we were. Jay was studying history in school—so he said . . . let's call ourselves Balkans. So we told the cops—we're the Balkans—and that was it.

(Yablonsky, 1970, p. 42)

Indeed, in the early stage of gang formation, the name itself emerges as a function of identity and crystallization. Gangs often do not consider themselves “gangs,” rather as some type of legitimate community organization. Do gangs necessarily have to have illicit goals, functions, or engage in law violation collectively or as individuals? Or can a gang have prosocial purposes? Gangs have sometimes cloaked themselves in a veneer of possessing conspicuous prosocial functions as a public relations function, and members of motorcycle gangs get involved in collecting toys for needy children.

Gangs like the Gangster Disciples in Chicago, for example, prefer being called a community support or political organization, because they have been able to stage protests with several thousand members marching in unison in front of City Hall and claim the name “Growth and Development.” The Gangster Disciples also engaged in political endeavors with their 21st Century Voices of Total Empowerment (21st Century V.O.T.E.), claiming that gang leaders had found solutions for urban problems ranging from drugs to unemployment to homelessness (Papajohn & Kass, 1994). The Gangster Disciples were not the only gang involved in the political scene. The P-Stone Rangers (later known as the El Rukns and the Black P Stones) applied for and received over a million dollars in anti-poverty funds in the 1960s. The Avenues, predecessors to the Crips, were involved with the Black Panther Party in California in the 1960s. Many of the outlaw motorcycle gangs have engaged the community by conducting toy drives for kids and have shown support for various political candidates. The Mafia was also well known for supporting political figures.

To some extent, gangs gain acceptance in the community through the tendency of American culture to romanticize and often idolize gang exploits. This has been
particularly seen in Broadway productions, Hollywood movies, television shows, and “true crime” paperback books. Gorn (1987) reported the case of massive public attendance involving thousands of people at a gang leader’s funeral back in the 1850s. What all gangs and those in the funeral procession seemed to have in common was their social class. Al Capone as a gang leader has been significantly represented in fiction, myth, and through the Hollywood movie industry. Even the tourist industry in Chicago adapted itself. Bus tours routinely take tourists through the city to show them where Capone conducted business, where mobsters were slain, and so forth.

An “Al Capone” museum was opened as a tourist attraction in Chicago as well. A bar in Peotone, Illinois, locally referred to as “Capone’s place,” features a large picture of him and a sign reading Gangster’s Hall. Gang members of today also have their own place, or niche, in some music genres and television shows, and enjoy the notoriety of public affiliation with sports professionals and actors alike. Several well-known entertainers have gang or organized crime member or gang-affiliate roots, either unknown, overlooked, or appreciated by their fans, including Ice-T, Suge Knight, Snoop Dogg, Chris Brown, Elizabeth Hurley, James Caan, Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, and Mark Wahlberg.

**Defining Gangs and Organized Crime**

Some of the literature on gangs tends to describe “wannabe” gang members, discounting those “wannabe gangs” and their members as not posing a threat to society. We should be very concerned about wannabe gang members. The reason is this: when one wannabe shoots another wannabe, we do not have a “wannabe homicide”; we have a real gang homicide on our hands. But we should be wary of anyone who discounts their local gang problem as consisting only of wannabe gang members, because in far too many cases the “wannabe” is really a “gonnabe.” Eventually, wannabes meet and likely learn from the “real thing” (i.e., hard core OGCs—Original Gangstas) when they get processed into the criminal justice system and are sent off to a correctional facility. Additionally, those folks often feel they have something to prove and little in the way of guidance and supervision from someone who has done what they aspire to do. That could make them more dangerous and unpredictable than the typical gang member.

Often, the excuse is made that gang members get a bad label from society. Gang members seek out reputations on the street (“street cred” or a “rep”) as a shooter, killer, thug, enforcer, brutal, badass, and a host of other terms that most of us would consider immoral or illegal. They do not seek out a rep as the guy who helps at the local library reading to children or assists the local non-profit by volunteering as a mentor. It is not a gang researcher who puts labels on the gang member—it’s other gang members.

The most essential feature of the criminal gang is that its members routinely engage in unlawful violent behavior. This is done individually, in small groups, and often in an
organized continuing fashion. The nature of this involvement with crime will be seen to provide the basis for examining gangs from a social organizational perspective. Thus, without crime, we would not have a gang: it would be a deviant group or deviant organization at best. As an example, Thrasher’s study of gangs included many Social Athletic Clubs (SACs) that today might be viewed at most as a nuisance, but not gangs (2000).

We also cannot oversimplify the term gang by taking the viewpoint that any organized group containing offenders must necessarily constitute a gang. Were that kind of ambiguous definition used in gang analysis, then correctional officials would have to conclude that any prosocial club or organization behind the walls of correctional institutions constitutes a social gang. Police and corrections officers do not encounter social gangs, those who never come to the attention of the criminal justice system. Rather, they see the hardcore criminal gang members. It is mostly the criminal gang member whom we find in our jails and prisons.

Gangs represent a group, collective behavior, organizational patterns, and other features that have historically been the turf of the sociology discipline. However, other disciplines have much to add to this area of study; those include the perspectives from law, psychology, economics, social service administration/social work, human development, urban studies, anthropology, criminal justice, corrections, and other areas of social sciences. That means the study of gangs should be interdisciplinary. It also means students should seek out, when possible, reliable research about gangs. A student must be vigilant and learn to identify the mistakes that can be made in misinterpreting research findings and drawing conclusions, as well as learn to defend oneself against misinformation and intentional disinformation.

Emile Durkheim (1965) suggested, “The sociologist’s first step must therefore be to define the things he treats, so that we may know . . . exactly what his subject matter is” (p. 74). A specific definition is “needed precisely because a researcher or theorist cannot take everyone [or everything] to the phenomenon in question” (Ball & Curry, 1997, p. 4). However, there exists no consensus for a definition of the terms “gang” or “gang-related crime” as they are used within academe, among government agencies, or by the U.S. criminal justice system.

Knox (1994, p. 5) raised the question: “Does calling a group a gang make it a gang?” He suggested that it depends on who is forming the definition. He further stated (1994, p. 5) that “[t]he difference is power.” The voice of a community resident differs in definitive power from the voice of a U.S. attorney or a local prosecutor. The difference is the power to establish and assign formal definitions for a society. Accepting the argument that definitive power is a determining factor, it is logical to surmise that a sociological or political definition was most likely used in publications rather than one constructed by a community resident.

Legally, we need to recognize that specific laws addressing gangs have only recently come into being. There is the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations
(RICO) statute and its many mini-RICO versions at the state level of criminal law. These define organizations engaged in violation of the law and can be used for both criminal and civil prosecution. Again, however, language is no friend of social science. For example, Illinois, among other states, has a “mob action” criminal statute which covers crimes committed in a group, including civil protest demonstrations. Literally thousands of persons have been arrested under this statute for protests associated with the “right to life” movement and banning abortion. Most people arrested for protesting the operation of an abortion clinic would probably reveal a prosocial motivation of a higher social purpose and an intent to be arrested, not to avoid arrest. Their behavior is a matter of civil disobedience in their minds. Indeed, they may be a very religious persons who knows that mass media attention will come their way due to their protest and arrest, and not because of their “cause.”

Groups with internalized higher moral imperatives (e.g., to protect the environment) may engage in civil disobedience knowing they will be arrested for their behavior and willfully continuing such behavior as a moral protest. They cannot be considered
“gangs” in any sense. The reasoning here rests with the fact that their intent is not to do harm through violence or to benefit economically through criminal code violation. Furthermore, in such civil disobedience they do not seek to evade arrest.

It is appropriate, therefore, to review some of the definitions in use by social scientists and government agencies. Social scientists are generally considered to be the “experts” or “authorities” based on the extent of their experience and research in specific areas, and the extent of professional acceptance of their academic publications. Gusfield (1980) stated that sociological perspectives are “systematic maps for understanding” and “carry messages . . . that are wise, proper and effective in responding to public issues” (p. 1).

Four recurrent themes exist among a representative sampling of gang definitions offered by social scientists: self-recognition as an identifiable group, perception and labeling by the community as a group, delinquent or criminal acts, and an actual or a willingness to use violence and force to achieve goals (Kirk-Duggan, 1997; Klein, 1971; Miller, 1975; Moore, 1997; Sanders, 1994). More recently gang scholars have defined street gangs as “any durable, street oriented youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity” (Klein, 2007, p. 18). Contemporary street gangs “have generally been in existence for 20 or more years: they keep regenerating themselves” (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 176). All gangs (like other organizations) have an identified hierarchy, with a defined set of leaders and followers (Sheldon, Tracy, & Brown, 2001; Weisberg, 2003).

A group is a gang when it exists for or benefits substantially from the continuing criminal activity of its members. Some element of crime must exist as a definitive feature of the organization for it to be classified as a gang. That need not be income-producing crime, because it could also be violent crime. Conspiracy laws have some application here. To prove a conspiracy it is generally necessary to prove one or more overt acts in furtherance of the conspiracy. The key word is “overt.” It must be open and clearly regarded as law violating behavior. That is, they know it is wrong, they know it is against the law, and they do it anyway. Some element of criminal conspiracy to avoid detection for law violation must therefore be present, whether the actual/objective/material skill/knowledge/ability to avoid or limit the probability of arrest exists.

Thus from the perspective of the analysis advanced in this book, a group is not a gang simply because it is labeled as being in some sense deviant. A group is a gang if and only if it meets the higher requirement of having a known involvement with crime. It can therefore include the Crips, Bloods, Gangster Disciples, Vice Lords, Latin Kings, Pagans, Hells Angels, Outlaws, and a host of others whose primary function is income-producing crime or those who benefit substantially from it. Such crime patterns, particularly of more organized gangs who have been able to accumulate economic assets, can also include a mixture of legitimate income (small businesses, hustling, etc.) and criminal pursuits.

Gang definitions used by law enforcement agencies have typically included some variation of these requirements: a group of individuals (often specified as three or more
persons) who associate on a continuous basis; self-recognition as an identifiable group using a group name, symbols, structured style of dress, and hand signals; claim a particular geographic territory, neighborhood or turf; and through its membership engages in a course or pattern of recurrent criminal activity directed towards rival gangs and the general population (Illinois State Police, 1997; San Diego County Deputy Sheriffs’ Association, 1994; Virginia Commission on Youth, 1996). The National Alliance of Gang Investigator Associations has proposed a standard definition for law enforcement: a gang is a formal or informal group or association of three or more persons with a common identifying sign, symbol, or name who individually or collectively engage in criminal activity that creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation (NAGIA, 2005).

Research and analyses on differences between gangs and organized crime groups has been relatively well documented (Thrasher, 1927; Howell & Decker, 1999; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Organized crime groups have been said to differ from gangs as they typically reinvest the profits from their crimes to further the group (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011).

Cressey (1969) was one of the first to suggest a standardized definition of organized crime:

An organized crime is any crime committed by a person occupying, in an established division of labor, a position designed for the commission of crimes providing that such division of labor include at least one position for a corrupter, one position for a corruptee, and one position for an enforcer.

(p. 319)

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2004) defined organized crime as a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offenses established . . . in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.

(p. 5)
of gangs, but which is at the same time most underdeveloped in the sense of linking what we know about social organization generally to the more specific problem of the study of gangs. An organizational viewpoint allows for more effective law enforcement, greater choices in managing the problem in the field of corrections, and much more latitude in addressing the gang problem from all levels of prevention—primary, secondary, and tertiary (e.g., aftercare services).

An extensive list of gang-related activities could be readily constructed by drawing from personal observation, a host of gang researchers, newspaper articles, or television documentaries. This list would probably include everything from the beer drinking of minors while playing games of dominoes, to littering and graffiti, to the sale of controlled substances and to murder. One may safely suggest that gang-related activities generally fall under the title of “crime,” representing offenses from statutory, civil and criminal codes.

One issue in the problem of defining “gang-related crime” was that of determining when to count a crime as related to, or unrelated to, a gang. Many suggest that the gang or its leader must have prior knowledge of, and give approval for, the commission of a criminal act. In other words, “[a] gang incident is an incident in which there was gang motivation, not mere participation by a gang member” (Spergel, 1991, p. 23). Thus one is faced with having to decide whether a crime must be committed under the auspices of a gang or its leader, and whether it was to their mutual benefit. Many gang-enhancement laws require the demonstration of a benefit of the gang to bring an increase in the penalty.

Why Do Gangs and Organized Crime Groups Exist?

Theories of crime are explanations of causation that apply to all people and all crimes. Theories are not absolute, but they are significant. Theory guides practice. If we know why people join gangs, then it would be possible to devise strategies that prevent that from occurring. Some of the theories may make sense to the reader, and some may not. The theories presented here are by no means all-inclusive. They are presented for consideration by present and future criminal justice professionals to explain the existence of gangs and organized crime groups.

A gang is a group. Organized criminals operate in a group. Therefore, we will examine various theories of group criminality. As a result, many traditional gang theories have been omitted, especially those related distinctly to youth gangs. The absence of those theories in no way serves to dismiss their validity or application in other contexts. Most theorists view the gang as a group or tribe while others view the gang as an illicit alternative economic enterprise. Both schools of thought will be examined.
The Gang as a Group or a Tribe

For over 100 years, theorists have examined the gang from the standpoint of a group or self-affiliated tribe. As such, these criminal groups combine themselves into self-affiliated tribal structures to help them conduct their criminal enterprises and to avoid the police. In these criminal groups, they have adopted a pseudo-warrior culture to facilitate their criminal society. These self-affiliated tribal groups exhibit many of the characteristics of traditional tribes such as a self-declared identity or tribal name for their gang and use totems or symbols to identify with the group. Many have established social interactions and practice ritualism and selective membership in the same manner as fraternities or sororities, although for very different reasons. Reasons for joining such voluntary criminal associations can include a wish to belong to something, protection from other hostile gangs and perceived opportunities for power or economic success (Etter, 1998).

Frederic M. Thrasher (1920s)

Thrasher was one of the first researchers to study gangs as a group. Thrasher’s work *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* is worth discussing not simply because it was an early study of gangs, but because of the enduring influence of Thrasher’s approach to gang research. Thrasher’s approach can be called the natural history approach, which has been heavily associated with the Chicago School of sociology. But the gangs Thrasher analyzed were youth gangs and were at best periodically delinquent, and certainly did not reach the level of violence associated with modern gangs in the twenty-first century (2000).

An etiological sequence is suggested by Thrasher for gang development that revolves around associations between members. This developmental sequence recognizes five sources of gang input: (1) a spontaneous play group, (2) a casual crowd, (3) the family itself, (4) intimacy groups (adolescent dyads), and (5) the formal group. Thrasher saw eight developmental outputs of the gang: (1) a mob (not implying organized crime), (2) a secret society, (3) public, (4) ring, (5) criminal gang, (6) orgiastic group, (7) political machine, and (8) a psychological crowd (both action type and orgiastic type).

Thrasher’s gang etiology sequence recognizes a difference between the pseudo-gang, the gang itself, and separately the criminal gang. The gang itself can develop, incrementally, into three stages: (1) diffuse or amorphous, (2) solidified or well-knit, and (3) conventional or formalized. The gang in its embryonic state can first emerge from a variety of sources such as the spontaneous play group, a casual crowd, the family, a small intimate dyad, or even a formal group. The kind of gangs studied by Thrasher were mostly at the lower end of the organizational sophistication spectrum.
**William Foote Whyte (1930s)**

Whyte made an ethnographic study of gangs and urban life in Boston’s North End. In his book *Street Corner Society* (1943), he explained the study of one Italian community called Cornerville, circa 1937. Like Thrasher, Whyte described the behavior of local street corner groups that drifted into gang and criminal behavior while still engaging in some legitimate behaviors including organized bowling tournaments. Whyte viewed this criminal youth gang association as temporary and observed that most of the gang members married and moved out of the neighborhood, thus ending their involvement in the group. Whyte (1943) observed that new youth gangs formed along the same pattern to replace the existing gang members. The local youth street gangs were also involved in local politics. Whyte saw the street corner gang as arising from “the habitual association of members over a long period of time.” When some gang members left the community, a group would disintegrate, and its members merged with another group.

**Edwin Sutherland (1940s)**

Sutherland’s (1940) Differential Association Theory explained how gang and organized crime group members acquire the knowledge and skills to be of use to the criminal organization. Sutherland noted that:

1. Criminal behavior is learned.
2. Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication.
3. The principal part of learning criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups.
4. When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very simple; and (b) the specific motives and drives, rationalizations, and attitudes (pp. 6–7).

With the theory of differential association, Sutherland suggested that all behavior, lawful and criminal, was learned in intimate personal groups, whereas learning the techniques of sophisticated criminality required the proper environment (Sutherland, 1940). It was also noteworthy that he observed illegitimate opportunity for success, like legitimate opportunity, was not equally distributed throughout society and access to criminal ladders of success were no more freely available than are non-criminal alternatives.
Albert K. Cohen (1950s)

While Cohen is more remembered for his views on why youth participate in individual criminality (he blamed class frustrations and blocked needs), he made several observations of gangs as well. In Cohen’s (1955) *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*, Cohen engaged in a theoretical discussion of delinquent subcultures. The general theory of subcultures advanced by Cohen was termed the psychogenic model. Basically, Cohen saw youth gangs emerging as a reaction formation to status frustration among working class youths who are less likely to have been socialized into middle class values.

Cohen (1955) argued that the delinquent subculture rejected the social norms of the dominant larger culture and thus engaged in anti-social activities. For example, Cohen described stealing by gang members as a “diversified occupation.” Cohen also observed that another characteristic of youth gangs was “short-run hedonism” and that little interest was shown in long term goals. Cohen also noted the youth gang’s desire for “group autonomy or intolerance of restraint” (pp. 28–31). He assumed all behavior including gang behavior is problem-solving behavior (p. 50), and acknowledged that some gang members might be motivated by Merton’s (1938) “illicit means theory” (p. 35).

Herbert Bloch and Arthur Niederhoffer (1950s)

Bloch and Niederhoffer (1958) advanced the hypothesis that gangs seemed to provide the adolescent with those things not provided by traditional social institutions, such as rites of passage from youth into perceived adulthood. Therefore, they suggested, the gang becomes a surrogate family and provides other necessary functions as well which may not be satisfied through the existing social structure.

Walter B. Miller (1950s)

Miller (1958) developed the Subculture Theory based on his study of juvenile gangs in Roxbury, Massachusetts. He discovered that youth in gangs had different focal concerns than those of the rest of the population. The cultural things that were important to juvenile gang members included trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate and autonomy.

Lewis Yablonsky (1960s)

In Yablonsky’s work *The Violent Gang* (1962) Yablonsky’s classification of gangs included three types: (1) delinquent gangs, (2) violent gangs, and (3) social gangs (1962, p. 149). What dominates the gang ethos explains its gang function (delinquency, violence, social, etc.). Thus, what kind of gang it is depends on the type of norms, behavior patterns, and personalities of the gang membership.
It was the violent gang organization that Yablonsky analyzed in detail. The picture that emerges of the violent gang according to Yablonsky (1962) is as follows: the gang emerges spontaneously; it provides a sense of power; joining is easy; initiation rites are pretty much a myth; it is easy to quit the gang, but leaders and core members seldom leave the gang (p. 155); the leaders are self-appointed manipulators who “manifest paranoid delusions of persecution and grandeur” (p. 156); they use the myth of vast alliances with other gang nations and affiliates; and gang warfare is like a group contagion and often has no clear purpose other than trivial things that trigger conflict. The sociopathic members live in slums in urban communities facing negative forces of decay and erosion. Prejudice and discrimination aggravate the gang problem (p. 184).

From Yablonsky came the differentiation between “core” versus “marginal” members, a continuum of organized-unorganized with respect to the gang infrastructure. In this scheme a mob fits the pattern of unorganized, while the violent gang fits the pattern of being a near group, and social/delinquent gangs fit the pattern of being most organized. Basically, the differences in personalities mediate all causal factors and the personality types determine what kind of gang a youth joins.

**James F. Short Jr. and Fred L. Strodtbeck (1960s and 1970s)**

In *Group Process and Gang Delinquency*, Short and Strodtbeck (1965) extended the Chicago School tradition of gang studies to be the first major study with a large sample size using multivariate statistical analysis. They provided the first comprehensive comparison along racial lines and documented white racist bias crime through qualitative data. Thus, the basic position taken by Short and Strodtbeck (1965; 1974) was that status related to general society (employment aspirations, legitimate career potential, educational attainment, etc.) was important but that status within the small group context is more immediately likely to have impact on outcomes like gang violence (e.g., status threats, and status enhancing functions of the gang). Both the social structure and the group process must be considered.

**Malcolm W. Klein (1970s to 1990s)**

Defining what he perceived to be a gang, Klein (1971) observed that a gang refers to any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in the neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies. (p. 111)
It was a definition that would be adopted by many gang researchers in the following years.

In his later works, Klein (1990) observed there are different varieties of street gangs and the gangs of Los Angeles did not adhere to a specific hierarchical structure. Klein found that the modal age of the average gang member in the Los Angeles area had increased from 16 to 20 (p. 6). He noted that different ethnic groups had become involved in local gangs and cited Asians as an example (p. 7). Klein also found that the street gangs were engaging in an increased amount of violence and noted that nearly 40% of all Los Angeles County homicides “were gang related” (p. 6).

Klein (1990) stated that gang members do not spend their days enmeshed and engulfed in a full schedule of violence; they also have normal lives (p. 14). Klein created controversy especially with the law enforcement community when he advocated that evidence does not exist that gangs truly control all or even a significant share of drug sales in America (p. 15). Klein also professed that no evidence existed that Los Angeles based gangs like the Crips and Bloods had franchised and exported crack distribution rings to the rest of the United States (p. 15). Most American law enforcement officials disagreed with this view based on what had occurred in their communities.

James D. Vigil (1980s)

Vigil focused on the barrio gangs of East Los Angeles and his ethnographic study saw the gang arising and persisting because of the marginality of gang members in terms of ecological, socioeconomic, cultural and psychological factors. Vigil argued that it is not a simple matter of alienation, but rather gangs arise and persist because of an accentuated estrangement. He discussed the psychodynamic factors of gangs in terms of Erikson’s identity and related ego and self-identity formations. Vigil argued that family conditions, when stressful, also are seen as important ingredients in gang affiliation, and why the gang itself becomes a kind of surrogate family.

Irving Spergel (1990s)

In his study of youth gang subcultures for the National Youth Gang Center, Spergel (1993) found the structure of the gang was based on its needs for maintenance or development. The structure requires that certain roles be performed by core members, peripheral or fringe members, and recruits. The core describes the inner clique of leaders and members that is actively engaged in the everyday functioning of the gang. Core members interact frequently and relate easily to each other. They have been described as “those few who need and thrive on the totality of the gang’s activity” (p. 36).
William B. Sanders (1990s)

Sanders provided perhaps the best sociologically grounded approach to ethnographic research on gangs. The study dealt with gang violence in San Diego. It explained why some social values like loyalty have different meanings to gangs than they do to others, or rather how in the gang context the value of loyalty is “grounded” in the specific gang culture. That may help to explain how some have regarded gang members as having twisted or upside-down value systems. Sanders showed that gang members are focused on the group and the concerns of the gang.

George W. Knox (1980s and 2000s)

Knox (1981) proposed the use of a synthesis of structural and subcultural models of social and reintegration for ex-offenders in the concept of differential integration. The concept of differential integration was based on the commonality of emphasis on group affiliation in both structural and subcultural approaches (Knox, 1981). Knox observed that ex-offenders had limited legitimate opportunities and were, as a result, less integrated into the traditional, law-abiding community while having ready access to many subgroups in the community more inclined toward deviance. Differential integration states that the explanation for why ex-offenders return to criminal activity (recidivate) involves both the limited opportunities they face and the attraction of the deviant subculture to which they are exposed.

In his extensive study of Chicago based street gangs (2006), Knox found that the gangs exhibited a patriarchal and hierarchical organizational structure. The gangs exhibited a pseudo-warrior culture and claimed defined areas of turf. In keeping with the pseudo-warrior culture, the Chicago based gangs often embraced group identities that reflected a value for mental illness, with words like insane added to the gang’s name to make them seem more fierce to their rivals. Unlike Los Angeles based gangs, Knox observed that the Chicago based gangs were involved in local politics. The gangs used political corruption and misuse of social services funds for economic gain. Although the Chicago based gangs began as youth gangs, they have evolved into adult gangs and have lasted for over 60 years spreading with the drug trade all over the United States.

Gangs as an Alternate Economic Means of Success

Some theorists (beginning with Merton in 1938) view the gang as an illicit alternative economic enterprise. Those theorists saw the primary purpose of the gangs was making money. The gangs used the commission of crimes along with the providing of illicit goods and services to achieve these goals. As new opportunities arose, the criminal
A gang was able to respond to these new opportunities through innovation to exploit the opportunity and benefit the criminal organization.

**Robert K. Merton (1938): Social Structure and Anomie**

Merton expanded the anomie theories of Durkheim. Merton saw the United States of the 1930s as a culture that placed an overstressing of economic success without providing an equal access to the same opportunities to achieve that economic success. Thus those who could not achieve material success through traditional means such as work, education, or family felt strain by being excluded from the opportunities to achieve success. Merton theorized that individuals engaged in various adaptations because of this strain, including:

- Conformity—some people would simply accept that they would never be a success and would conform to the established social values.
- Ritualism—the effect of being so caught up in the rules or means of achieving success that they have lost sight of the goals.
- Retreatism—A retreatist rejects both the means and the ends of success. Examples are often cited as drug abuse, drunkenness, mental illness, or suicide.
- Rebellion—rejecting both the means and goals that define success, attempting to substitute alternative ones to change the existing order.
- Innovation—accepting the goals but often rejecting the established means of success, perhaps using illegitimate means.


Building on the theories of Merton (1938) and Sutherland (1947), Cloward and Ohlin (1960) assumed that in every community there are both legitimate and illegitimate opportunities for success. However, when a youth experiences or perceives closure in the legitimate opportunity and simultaneously has chances to make a living in the illicit or illegal opportunity structure, then delinquency occurs.

Cloward and Ohlin believed that youth who transcended into an adult criminal career often participated in delinquent subcultures. They observed (1960) that these delinquent subcultures “are often integrally linked to adult criminal groups” such as gangs (p. 10). Cloward and Ohlin found that there were three basic delinquent subcultures: criminal, conflict and retreatist. They felt that the criminal subculture
developed in slum neighborhoods and embraced criminal acts as an illegitimate means to success. In the conflict subculture, both legitimate and illegitimate means of success were rejected. Violence and defense of turf was used to enhance prestige. Cloward and Ohlin also observed that those who could not achieve some measure of success using either legitimate or illegitimate means often turned to the retreatist subculture where they in effect “dropped out” and sought “kicks” by participating in drug abuse (pp. 161–186).

**R. Lincoln Keiser (1969): The Vice Lords: Warriors of the Streets**

In this ethnographic study of the Vice Lords, Keiser found that the gang engaged in activities for economic gain. He witnessed the “franchising” of gang branches within the gang organization, including their operation of a restaurant, a recreation center, an employment service, their business office, and their status as a legally incorporated not-for-profit corporation as far back as 1968.

**Richard W. Poston (1971): Gangs as Grant Funding Hustlers**

Poston’s (1971) *The Gang and the Establishment: A Story of Conflict Rising Out of the Federal and Private Financing of Urban Street Gangs*, is a detailed historical chronology of an indigenous social program managed by an ex-gang member originally called the “Real Great Society” (RGS) located in New York City. Its leaders use theatrics, myth, mass media manipulation, and political grandstanding to generate contributions from government, corporate, and private foundation sources. This is a prime example of the type of adaptation and innovation mentioned by Merton (1938). Although this example occurred in New York City, similar social service agency scams were run by both the Folk and People Nation gangs in Chicago during the same period.

**Joan W. Moore (1978): Homeboys—Gangs, Drugs, Prisons, Barrios**

In Moore’s (1978) *Homeboys: Gangs, Drugs, and Prison in the Barrios of Los Angeles*, the essence of the viewpoint presented tends to follow, to some extent, a racial oppression thesis. Gang structure becomes defined as having the following components: territoriality based, age-graded, “with a new klika, or cohort, forming every two years or so,” and all Chicano gangs are fighting gangs with high levels of drug use (pp. 35–36). The gang is regarded as a quasi-institution in the barrio and involves the adult world. An illicit economic view of drug trafficking and marketing in the barrio are presented (pp. 78–87). A theme is also developed is that barrio men sent to prison made new connections and became more sophisticated in their criminal operations (p. 87).
John Hagedorn and Perry Macon (1988): Gangs as Part of the Underclass

In their work, People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City, Hagedorn and Macon (1988) focused on the previously unexplored aspects of racial oppression in explaining predominantly minority group membership in Milwaukee’s youth gangs. Rather than a single theory, the authors present their tape recorded oral history data from 47 “top dogs” or gang founders, and then evaluate previous contributions in terms of what fits the Milwaukee context.

As proof of their views, Hagedorn and Macon (1988) cited employment data to show a declining economic opportunity for inner-city minority group members. Gang members were uniformly school dropouts (p. 44). They felt that gang formation occurred in Milwaukee in the context of a race relations crisis, thus racial oppression has some causal significance to gangs (p. 50).

Phillippe Bourgois (1989): Drugs as an Alternative Business

Bourgois’s (1989) ethnographic study of the illegal crack trade in New York, In Search of Horatio Alger: Culture and Ideology in the Crack Economy, observed that gangs engaged in the drug trade as a business and as an alternative illicit means to success. The study found that the gangs participated in a pseudo-warrior culture and claimed and enforced their territories for their drug trade using violence. He found that the gangs had a clearly defined hierarchy, with bosses who directed workers in the drug trade, maintained records of business transactions (such as collecting receipts), and protected the interests of their drug business through violence (p. 632).


In Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Society, Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) observed in low income urban areas that gangs were a natural response in the competition for scarce resources and they constituted an alternate social order. Sanchez-Jankowski observed that to function efficiently, gangs establish three particular structures. In the first, leadership categories are labeled and assigned authority. In the second, roles and duties for both leadership and membership are defined. In the third structure, codes are created and enforced to ensure order. Sanchez-Jankowski also found that criminal organizations adapted to their circumstances using five entrepreneurial attitudes that included:

- Competitiveness, both with others and themselves
- The desire and drive to accumulate money and material possessions
• Status seeking
• The ability to implement both simple and complex plans
• The ability to undertake risks in pursuit of their goals.

**Felix M. Padilla (1992): The Gang as a Business Enterprise**

Padilla examined the economic model of gang organization that provides insight to the motivations of why gangs exist. His study of former members of a Chicago gang focused on an important aspect of gang life: drug selling as “work.” It is work that is not very rewarding, but provides a “hand to mouth” subsistence with the real profits going to the higher-up gang leaders. Despite the rhetoric in their gang constitutions, the gangs basically mimic their capitalistic society and seek to exploit the “workforce” of gang members willing to push drugs or commit other crimes of economic profit.

Padilla (1993) observed that some gangs attempted to achieve economic success by the sale of drugs to the point that the sale of drugs had become the gang’s primary enterprise and focus (p. 91). A violent pseudo-warrior culture developed among the Los Angeles based street gangs to maintain turf, control drug trade, control competition in the drug trade, control internal personnel, and fight off threats from rival gangs (FBI, 2014a, Bloods and Crips Gangs; Etter, 1998, p. 31; Cureton, 2008, p. 2).

**Steven D. Levitt and Sudhir A. Venkatesh (2000): Economic Analysis of a Drug-Selling Gang’s Finances**

Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) observed that prior to 1980, gangs were largely a local affair that were organized around social peer groups. However, they cited the rise of crack cocaine in the 1980s as creating a change in the mission, organizational structure, and operations of street gangs that they labeled “corporatization.” They observed that due to the lucrative monetary incentives that became available in the drug trade, many if not most gangs became involved in the selling of drugs.

In their study of drug dealing by gangs as an alternative to participation in the legitimate labor market, they found:

• Earnings in the gang are somewhat above the legitimate labor market
• The risks of drug selling more than offset that amount
• Compensation is highly skewed, and potential future riches are the primary economic motivation
• The gang engages in repeated gang wars
• The gang sometimes establishes prices below cost.
Their results suggested that economic factors alone were unlikely to adequately explain individual participation in the gang or gang behavior.

**Simon Harding (2014): London’s Street Casino**

Simon Harding’s ethnography of the youth gangs in London used what is called Bourdieu’s field analysis. This social field analysis of gangs represented a sociological approach to methodology and analysis developed by Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociological game theorist. It assumes that economic capital and social capital are closely related. In this way, Harding describes how gang members are the players on the field in the us-versus-them gangster game in positions to attack or defend a set of rules (which Bourdieu called “doxa”). In the London street gang game, gang members seek to acquire money and street capital (street cred). Like the role of the dice, the likelihood of accumulating a lot of chips (accumulation of wealth) or losing it all (the house holds the advantage always) is a matter of chance and probability. The possibility of prison and violent injury exist in gang life as some of the possible random outcomes of the game.

**Summary**

There is good reason to be concerned about the gang crime problem in America. Minimally we need to know whether gang-related crimes make up a large or small share of our national crime statistics. Unfortunately, very little raw data are collected, and as a result almost no hard, information exists. We are left relying on after-the-fact, self-reported surveys filled out by employees of law enforcement agencies using their memories and gut feelings.

Additionally, many persons who work at all echelons in the criminal justice system need a comprehensive analysis of gangs in America today as part of their training (i.e., in law enforcement, corrections, probation, parole, judges, private and corporate security, as well as program/service/intervention staff, teachers and many others dealing with the problems of gang crime daily). This book may not answer all their questions, but it attempts to address all the major issues.

The chapter has provided a short overview of some of the major theories in the study of gangs and organized crime groups. We have not provided a simplistic summary of all criminological theories as they might pertain to, or could conceivably be interpreted as apply to, gangs. Theories examining both how the gangs as a group came to be and theories about the gang as an economic enterprise are presented. While gangs existed in the United States long before the 1920s, it was the 1920s before American criminologists like Thrasher (1927) began to look at groups of criminals as a group rather than as individual criminals. It was Merton (1938) that began to look at gangs as an economic enterprise that engaged in criminality as an alternate road to success in American society.
The theories presented in this chapter show that the gangs are groups with a set of common interests that are tribal in nature. Due to the wide geographical differences in the areas that the gangs formed in, there is no set gang leadership structure. Some gangs exhibit a hierarchical leadership structure that is almost stratified (especially Chicago based street gangs, outlaw motorcycle gangs, triads, etc.). Others are almost anarchistic in their lack of an established, well-defined leadership structure (Los Angeles based street gangs). Both types of gang structures are largely paternalistic. Almost all gangs engage in crime to make money as an alternative means to success. The gangs in these self-affiliated urban tribes engage in a pseudo-warrior culture that routinely uses violence or the threat of violence to achieve their desired ends.

What this chapter demonstrates is a diversity of approaches to the understanding of gangs. Along with this comes a range of research approaches that have been used. The analysis of gangs has also represented a theoretical and social policy focus. These contributions must be considered to understand the history and evolution of gangs in society.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How accurate do you think attempts to estimate the number of gangs and gang members are? What method would you propose?
2. Why would gangs emerge or organize along ethnic lines?
3. Would the most effective gang be one that is racially/ethnically integrated or one that is homogeneous?
4. How would you define a gang based on your current understanding of the law?
5. How would a gang see itself as a tribal group?
6. Define the economic model of gangs.
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